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Social networks and the international student experience: a community of practice to support learning?

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Introduction

This paper emphasises the significance of the social dimension in which learning occurs and focuses on the social environment beyond the classroom. Interest in researching the learning experience beyond the classroom has increased in recent years. Byram and Feng (2004) acknowledge that more research in the area of research '*beyond the traditional classroom*' is needed. Researchers as early as Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (Dentith:1996) have placed emphasis on the socio-cultural basis of learning. The premise that '*learning and development occur as people participate in the socio-cultural activities of their community*' (Rogoff, 1994: 204) is central to a socio-cultural view of learning and experience. This paper suggests that the relationships and friendships that we have with others are significant in terms of our learning experience.

Research Study

The research referred to in this paper is part of a research project leading to a PhD. The aim of the investigation was to analyse the role of social networks in the academic and personal experience of a group of international students at Northumbria University. This was done in order to explore the extent to which students' social networks contributed to the development of their personal and learning experience. The study sought to explore the factors that were involved in the international student's experience of social contact and focused on students forming close relationships both in their academic activity and the environment that surrounds the classroom. The aim was to place the social network of these students into context and to consider whether this social context had an influence on their learning experience. This involved observing and analysing the role of social networks in the academic and personal experience of a particular group of international students at Northumbria University. The study employed a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews and an extensive shadowing scheme to collect data. The analysis of the data has followed an emergent pathway, developing a coding system through use of the database Nudist 5 (N5).

The study consists of data drawn from two focus groups, a pilot study involving 4 students and a main phase with 7 students. Students who were considered to be socially successful and who were from one linked social network were identified using a variant of snowballing techniques. The seven participants studied between January 2003 and May 2003 therefore had some friendships in common. In addition to this it was considered important that the

students were selected not according to their nationality but according to their participation in the network (and also according to variables such as age and length of time studying). The study began with the premise that issues of nationality and culture can lead to misjudgements or stereotyping and thus it was decided to choose these students across nationality, relying on a social network rather than any politically constructed divisions of nationality. Each student was shadowed and observed for two separate days or a series of half days and followed to lectures, seminars or tutorials and in their everyday movements around the campus. In addition to this, as a number of the participants were involved in the university Chess Club some further observation was carried out in this social context and a group discussion with members of the Chess Club was recorded. The interviews and Chess Club discussion were transcribed and throughout the observation simultaneous field notes were made. The aim of this was to access rich and fine-grained data and also to attempt to see the university context from a student-led perspective. In addition to this the shadowing combined an observation element, exemplified by my own participation in the Chess Club where in many cases field notes were not being taken but research was still being carried out (participants were made aware that this was the case). Combining the shadowing and observation methods described with in-depth interviews was thought to be a powerful means of accessing a pluralistic view of the research context. It was also a means of addressing the issue of the '*Hawthorne effect*' through prolonged engagement with the students and what Lincoln and Guba (1985) term '*persistent observation*'.

The experience of international students as a community of practice

It is suggested in this paper that the strong social group formed by the students in the study resembled a community of practice, with its shared aims and interests, its sense of history and initiation of new members. One of the purposes of this community of practice appeared to be the reconstruction of the social capital that the students had lost through their transition to the UK; the social resources that supported them in their home environment were replaced by a network of international students who shared a powerful motivation to succeed and who supported each other academically, socially and to a certain extent emotionally. This international network can be said to partly represent the outcome of UK universities' drive to internationalise their institutions; the product of this global force is a diverse international group who come together for a short period of time but learn from each other and view their relationships and mutual support as part of their overall learning experience.

As the students' relationships developed over their time at the university, they developed a definite view of their futures as being international and global in nature; their experience in the UK amongst their international friends may thus have prepared them to live and work in a

community that has a global perspective. Whilst their peripheral relationships with UK students did not appear to contribute much to the development of their global perspective, this should not be seen as a deficit against the background of what they gain from their international group (although it is generally assumed that this lack of contact is a deficit). However, in terms of the experience of the UK students who live and study in a parallel community, there may be a missed opportunity to develop an international perspective through more profound social contact with the international student group.

Thus this paper considers whether the international student group studied forms a community of practice. '*Community of practice*' is a term coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) and the concept has attracted academic interest across a number of disciplines, particularly in the field of education. The concept is interesting and useful in this study because it promotes a view of learning that sees the participation in socio-cultural activities as central to the learning process. Lave and Wenger term these activities that surround learning '*legitimate peripheral participation*' (1991: 29). They see learning as a '*situated activity*' and one in which learners acquire knowledge and skills through their participation in communities. Indeed, in order to acquire this knowledge and skill learners must move towards full participation in the social and cultural practices of the community. The movement towards full participation is supported by other members of the community of practice and previous knowledge and experience is passed between '*old-timers*' and '*newcomers*'. Thus a shared identity evolves and learning is given a meaning by this process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. As Lave and Wenger note

'This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills' (1991: 29).

Lave and Wenger see learning almost as a process of '*cognitive apprenticeship*' (1991: 29) where students learn through the full range of social and academic experiences. They emphasise the idea that learning itself is '*an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice*' (1991: 31).

An important aspect of the data collected in this study suggested that the international students in the study formed a '*community of practice*' in which they shared the common goal and purpose of academic success. They supported each other emotionally and academically and information and experience was passed from student to student. The group appeared purposeful in their choice of friends; being successful in their studies was of prime importance and at times friendship was a significant support. Their group had a sense of time and history; experience was passed on to support those who were newly arrived and were just joining the group. There seemed to be a perception within this strong group that one of the

factors in its development was the sharing of experiences and this made friendship closer. There was also the feeling that there was always a common topic of conversation in the shape of shared experience and this engendered closer and more supportive relationships. This functional and close group appeared to be similar in nature to a community of practice as defined by Lave and Wenger. The significance of this is that the combination of psychological encouragement and practical, academic help provided by the group seemed to be a significant factor in the learning experiences of these international students. In addition to this it was viewed as a valued aspect of their academic experience and one that enriched their learning process. Indeed if the theory of the community of practice is applied to the students in this study it can be said that the students' social activity was an integral part of their learning experience.

It is interesting at this point to consider a small amount of the data collected in the study in more detail. This section of the paper will present some of the data from the study, particularly focusing on data indicating that the students formed a community of practice that supported their learning. Firstly it is interesting to note that students talked extensively about how they provided support for their friends. There was a strong sense that they were always willing and happy to help their friends and that they are active in supporting their contacts when they had difficulties. One of the students attending the Chess Club, when asked whether he provided support for his friends, replied

'Yeah. Well I mean people I know I ask them how things are going and I mean some people might treat that as a formality and say I'm fine and nothing's happening but other people if they truly want to let me know, they would tell me what's happening and you know just share with them what they're experiencing and if they do have problems I'm always going to help, always going to help.'

In addition to this willingness to help with general issues and difficulties there is a strong sense of reciprocal academic support for each other within the international student group.

Pei, a Chinese female student, describes well-organised study skills groups:

'Mainly we are talking about the study because sometimes in class we don't understand the lectures and some friends will email me to say they have some questions. Then we will arrange a meeting and talk about the lecture. So we have study groups, normally in the library.'

Arin, a male Italian student, is also conscious of the purposeful and useful nature of his friendship with his close friend Marcus, a male Dutch student, and feels that they both benefit from the academic support they provide for each other. He says

'Well I've got quite a partnership with Marcus, we study together to prepare for exams, I help him and he helps me. Yeah I think we're getting a great deal out of this friendship.'

These aspects of reciprocity and functionality in the students' relationships are aspects that recurred throughout the data and are aspects that appear to be particularly applicable to the international student group and do not appear to extend to the UK student group. Arin indicates that he does provide support for the UK students he knows on a certain level but that this is not reciprocated as he actually has more information about the course than his UK friends do. Thus, academic exchange does not appear to happen with these UK students in the same way that it does with his international counterparts and perhaps he feels because of their erratic attendance their relationship remains on a superficial level. He says

'Well emotionally it's nice for me to hang out with them, we have a laugh you know and talk about football and girls. I like that but with information level I don't think they help me.'

Q. Even though they're on your course?

A. Actually the thing is I give them some information about the course as they don't come so often.'

Q. So they're more likely to ask you?

A. Yes, it's more likely that I know about something than they do.'

Xan, an Indonesian male student, also has provided academic help for a range of his contacts and friends including English students. This was because in his first semester he received the highest marks in the group and therefore he was asked for help by other students. He does not mention this support being reciprocated and there is a sense that this mainly happened amongst his international student group. He says

'My first semester I got like the highest mark in the class and everybody like asked me things in the second semester.'

Q. Was that mainly international students?

A. Yeah mainly international students, classmates, my English flatmates, Arab people.'

Xan is accomplished academically and because of this is in a position to support his friends. As mentioned above there is data which suggests that students help and support their contacts by passing on information and experience which they have gained themselves. This is almost an initiation of newcomers to the group, carried out to spare the new students the difficulties experienced by their friends and this is another sense in which the international group appear to be a community of practice. When asked if she feels she supports others Sera, an Indian female student, says

'I think I do yes because of the experience I got when I first came here, when I look at a new person I can almost feel what they're thinking about or I feel lost and that everyone is unfriendly. So I sort of bring this up in conversations and say this is what I felt I felt the same as you but later I realised that some people are friendly just give a bit of time.'

This sense of empathy with new students is perhaps an aspect of the forming of a strong bond amongst the international student group and it is also one of the ways in which students appear to be forming a community of practice.

It seems that this strong sense of group is something that may have a sense of time and history as students talk about relying on information and support of students who have been here for longer than themselves and there is a sense that experience is passed on to help those who have recently arrived. Arin says

'If I have a serious problem, I have spoken to Bridden. You know, just to get his opinion he's been living longer in the UK.'

Xan reiterates this when he talks about his closest friend and the fact that he has already been here for a year. He says

'Yeah the Indian guy who was at the Chess Club, he was last year's student as well, he stayed here last year as well. He is my closest friend.'

Isken, a Nepalese student, also interprets his situation as being one in which he can learn from the difficulties past students in his current group have had and from this improve his own experience. He says

'We can learn by observing and meeting the local friends and ask them what they have done so far. We can learn from each others mistakes, from my friends' experience'

This is another sense in which this group can be said to resemble a community of practice.

Students also note that they support each other with the practical aspects of their academic work. The tasks they help each other with are various and include handing in assignments, help with proof reading and discussing aspects of their work with others. Pei says that if she has to miss a class she can rely on her friends not only to look after her but also to collect handouts for her.

'And also if I was ill when I was ill they could stay with me and the others could bring some handouts at the course.'

Xan also has the same experience; he relies on friends to keep him up to date with notes if he is ill but also they have set up groups to discuss their work and exchange information. He says

'Mostly with the Greek girl off my course. If I missed the lecture or she missed the lecture I would get materials or notes for her. We made some discussion for example for a group assignment we exchanged some information or gave ideas. Like helping each other with study, yeah. And with Mark as well he's my classmate and friend.'

A deliberate choice of friends and purposeful contacts made with other students are also in evidence. Xan interprets the behaviour of his friend as not being conducive to achieving high grades in exams and assessments therefore he chooses not to discuss academic work with him but to select friends for this who can help him achieve his aims.

'Q. Did you tend to get into groups with him [his friend] for discussion and so on?

A. The Greek girl yes but with Mark to be honest no because it seems like he is failing his course. So usually we don't discuss with him. From my point of view I'm better with the other students I can get better marks you know.'

This appears to be a quite functional approach to friendship and Xan has formed an impression of his friend with a view to ensuring the best personal outcome for himself.

These practical and reciprocal aspects of support are considered important by students and appear to be one of the factors that help them to function effectively in their new environment. Isken emphasises that it is not just the people on his course that he can learn from but he feels that he can learn from others across his network and also sees this discussion as an opportunity to apply ideas learned. He says

'We just say like with Amanda she was in Careers Guidance and we'd say okay what do you think my career will be and she will apply all the theories she has learned, you can do this and that. This is supporting each other as well and if she has problem she will ask, I have this kind of problem what do you think? It's a different field but it doesn't have to be practical occupation, you can just learn from it. It's really sharing knowledge between people who work in the hospital related fields. My friend asked me I saw a friend of a patient today and he is very depressed and what can I do for that? We come into the group and we talk about things like that.'

The combination of psychological encouragement and practical, academic help seems to be a significant factor in what helps these international students to continue with their lives in the UK. In this sense it is an important element of the social capital that students are gaining from their social network. In addition to this it is a valued aspect of their academic experience and in some way enriches their learning process. Isken notes

'It's quite nice also discussing things with a friend. If I really want to decide if I have understood the course alright then when we are talking we definitely see the reflections of our knowledge that we have gained in the class.'

Sera also indicates that there is a link between the development of close personal support and profound academic exchange. She seems to suggest that the close personal relationship allows better academic exchange to develop and thus provides an all-round relationship. In Sera's case this close relationship is with two English people from her course. When asked if she exchanged information with people on her course she says

'Yes academically as well as personal life, I'm close to two people, an English guy and an English girl so they know everything that is happening in my life as well so I tend to exchange academic information and personal information with them.'

This is interesting, as it is an example of a more profound and well-rounded relationship between international students and UK students.

Finally, throughout this section of the data the strong sense of group and identity amongst the international students comes through. Isken says

'Actually, when we come here the first thing we remember is that all of us are the international students and the problems we are facing are all similar. Some like me myself have been quite good at coping with the different cultures and different environments but they do have concerns as well. We always feel we are the international students and we must help each other'

So despite variation of opinion on the level of support emotionally and academically the overall impression formed by this data is that the international student group is a strong and well-defined supportive entity which helps students to carry on in their lives here.

Implications of the research

Thus a question raised by this study is whether HE should embrace more social theories of learning. This might be achieved in two ways: firstly, in class, better social exchange and collaboration in learning might promote improved learning of the subject and also have further-reaching effects beyond the classroom. Secondly, more consideration could be given to facilitating social learning outside of the classroom through focusing on students' learning environments, accommodation and social activities.

Wenger (1998) points out that our HE institutions approach learning as if it is an individual process and as though it is the direct result of teaching. He suggests that classrooms are introspective in nature and they bar participation with the world outside. Guidance is through one to one tutorials and exams are an individual challenge. Wenger says we should *'place learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world'* because *'learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon'* (1998: 3). Wenger's theories of

communities of practice see the idea of '*participation*' as learners becoming active participants in '*the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities*' (1998: 4). This involvement with the social group and social context within which we learn forms a '*community of practice*' with which we come together when we have a shared and common purpose. This type of learning has the evolution of our perception of both meaning and identity at its core and thus as we learn we change. The data in this study supports the assertion that the international students studied had the sense that they had changed because of their experience at university in the UK. Arin talked about his sense that he had become more able to get on with anyone and Xan talked about a similar feeling that he could adapt his own communication to suit a very wide range of different groups or '*cultures*'.

Indeed it could be said that their transition to the new environment in the UK had exerted a powerful influence on them. Ullman (1998) notes

'The act of immigrating to a new country can profoundly affect a person's social identity. In fact, some people experience this change more as an act of recreation than as a temporary period of readjustment....These transformations are complex and continual, redefining all aspects of self....' (1998: 1)

Thus, this paper suggests that we attach more significance to the social context of learning, acknowledge the complexity of learning and see the process of learning as a cultural act which '*depends on far more than fixed personal styles, traits or schemata*' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000: 584). As students learn it is hoped that their views change and as part of this their views of their own identity also change. If syllabi and courses could take account of this process then we would be working towards the idea that '*context means far more than simply the setting where learning is located*' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000: 596). In the case of international students attaching importance to their views of their learning context and changing identity would be a positive process that would improve not only the depth of their own learning but also impinge on the learning processes of our UK students.

Conclusions

This paper concludes with a reflection on the process of the research itself and upon changes in identity noted by the students involved in the research. The study notes how the process of research and particularly reflective research can change the views and to some extent the identity of both the researcher and the participants involved in a study. It is suggested here that the process of taking part in the research encouraged the students involved to make links between their personal relationships and their learning experience and that this process of

reflection and making sense of relationships in the educational context also gave further depth to the students' perception of their educational experiences. The enlightenment of the researcher through the research process also became a part of the investigation of the international student experience; for both researcher and researched these were personal journeys that involved learning and change.

During the course of the interviews and the observation students talked about themselves and how they felt their idea of themselves had changed (or stayed the same) since they came to the UK. It appeared that students felt that their learning experience in the UK had had an effect on their identity and their idea of their 'self'. A few students talked about how they had learned much about 'getting on' with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures. This is an interesting issue around the idea of adaptability and changing nature of self; Isken, a Nepalese male student, talks about retaining a professional relationship within the university and how he changes his approach to fit his different situations. Xan, an Indonesian male student, also talks at length about his sense of himself being adaptable and having an ability to change according to context and to whom he is speaking. Isken sees himself as easy going and relaxed (like Arin) and says himself that he can adapt to a changing environment. This seems to be another strong commonality that some students have seen as key to their social and academic success. The students in the study seem to be people who are skilled in changing and shifting roles according to context. The students' sense of themselves as being flexible and changeable perhaps also underlines their need for reference points both within their friendship groups and in retaining their relationships with their family. It may be that their experience as international students here has enabled them to be more adaptable and open to change in both context and in relationships. This could be said to be an integral part of their learning experience.

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